

'Awek cun' disturbing, says DAP newcomer
MalaysiaKini.com
July 15, 2014

INTERVIEW There is more to women than just being an “awek cun” or pretty lady, as DAP’s Rocketkini has recently found out.

And fellow newcomer to politics and DAP, Syerleena Rashid, finds the term “disturbing”, as she is not too comfortable with the connotation of the words.

“The term distracts readers from seeing the real contribution of women to the party and society,” Syerleena told Malaysiakini.

Syerleena, 34, is the party’s newly-minted Bukit Bendera Socialist Youth secretary, and the division’s women’s wing political education director.

She is one of the new breed of female party members like Teluk Intan by-election candidate Dyana Sofya Mohd Daud, 27, and Young Syefura Othman (left), 25, who was recently caught in the “awek cun” controversy.

In the incident, the party’s mouthpiece Rokekini was forced to apologise after it used the slang term 'awek cun' in an article on Young Syefura, boasting that the “population of ‘awek cun’ in DAP is on the rise”.

As for Syerleena, her decision to enter into politics, joining DAP after the 13th general election, came as little surprise as she grew up in a family centered in politics.

However, she is aware that politics, being male-dominated, can be a breeding ground of misogyny.

“What Dyana went through in Teluk Intan, can scare of some women but women should not be afraid of speaking up or joining politics as the country needs to hear voices from both sides and not leave it only to the men to decide policies and how society should exist,” she said.

In the Teluk Intan by-election, which culminated on May 29, with Dyana (right) losing to Gerakan president Mah Siew Keong, 53, the DAP candidate face a barrage of criticism due to her gender.

There were even episodes of slander where fake photos of her in a bikini were circulated in social media even before the campaign started.

True-blue Penang girl

Speaking about herself, Syerleena said she is true Penang girl, born in a house in Universiti Sains Malaysia, which is now the Archeology building, as her mother taught in the university.

Her father, meanwhile, was an ardent fan of Penang-based social reform movement Aliran. In fact, she joined and remains a member of Aliran.

“Back in the 80s, Aliran was the only source of alternative news. Dad would encourage me to talk about issues, and we got into a lot of discussion about what’s happening in Malaysia,” she said in an interview with Malaysiakini.

She is also a trained visual artist and active in sports such as kick boxing and wind surfing. She currently works in a sports company, teaching and training on various water sports such as windsurfing and sailing.

Musically-inclined, Syerleena (left) and her brother were among a few who formed and performed in local band Paku from 2006 to 2009.

Apart from that, she still finds time to contribute articles to Malaysiakini.

Syerleena studied in United States for awhile and later at the Malaysian Multimedia University, where she claimed she got into trouble for writing “a sensitive essay”.

She failed the paper and had to repeat a whole year in the university, based in Cyberjaya.

“It was an English assignment and the lecturer said we could write about anything at all.

“Being young, I thought this was my chance to vent but it didn't go down so well with the university. There were certain university policies and I was not aware of that, being 18 years old at that time” she recalled, but declined to go into details of her controversial essay.

“This experience left me questioning these kind of policies that would hinder progressive opinions which are very much needed to sustain development and progress into a society that we can be proud of.”

DAP is Malaysian first

But Syerleena’s awareness about the realities on the ground started even before her university days, while she was growing up in Kedah, where her parents originated from.

She said it was there where she first noticed a level of marginalised communities.. This she got her thinking about government policies and how much it really benefitted the people.

Kedah is also the home state of former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohammed (left), who

ruled the country for 22 years, and is touted as the “father of modernisation”.

“I started to ask, why is that we have certain policies that favour certain races but how come that other certain races are still being marginalised,” she said.

“They (the people) also do not see and do not question the level of corruption that is worrying in the country and levels of sincerity of certain parties.”

Even so, she dismisses the allegation that DAP is anti-Malay and anti-Muslim, saying she joined its struggle of seeing citizens as Malaysians first.

“It’s time we stop seeing ourselves as whatever ethnic pigeon hole you want to label us as.

“Let’s just think of ourselves as Malaysians, let us just progress, find ways to make Malaysia a better place to live,” she added.

Syerleena is very much aware of the brain drain which constantly plague the country, and the government’s effort to retain its talent.

“I don’t want to do that (leave the country for greener pastures). I want to stay here and just do the best for our future generation, as that is the one thing that we only have, at the end of day,” she said.

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